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UNCLAS KATHMANDU 001832

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SA/INS AND DS/OP/NEA  
LONDON FOR POL - RIEDEL  
SINGAPORE FOR FAA

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MAOISTS DESTROY MEDEVAC HELO; HOLD PILOT, PASSENGER

1. (U) A commercial helicopter on a mission to medevac a sick Nepali in the remote northeastern district of Solukhumbu has been destroyed by Maoists. According to an employee at Karnali Air, Ltd., the company's helicopter was surrounded by armed Maoists upon landing in the village of Jubu, and its four passengers and pilot (all Nepali citizens) ordered out. The Maoists then reportedly set the helicopter on fire, completely destroying it. Two passengers either managed to escape or were let go, and contacted the helicopter company. The pilot and at least one other passenger are apparently being held by the Maoists.

2. (SBU) The crew of a second Karnali helicopter, dispatched to survey the scene, spotted the burned-out hulk of the aircraft but saw no other activity on the ground. That helicopter returned to Kathmandu without landing at the site. Karnali has contacted the security forces for assistance in locating the hostages. The company is owned by Narayan Singh Pun, a former officer in the Royal Nepal Army and former Member of Parliament who recently formed his own party to contest the November elections.

3. (SBU) Comment: Karnali Air is one of several companies used by the Embassy for medevacs, especially from the Mount Everest Base Camp area and from popular trekking routes along the Annapurna Circuit. The loss of this helicopter will further strain the already limited alternatives available for medevac flights. With this latest act--destroying an aircraft on a mission of mercy--Maoist insurgents have sunk to a new low. The Embassy plans to issue a statement condemning the destruction and calling for the immediate release of the hostages.

MALINOWSKI